

North Korea's Foreign Policy Towards the United States

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Introduction

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (hereafter referred to as the DPRK or North Korea) is an authoritarian one-party state under the rule of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP).^[1] The DPRK was established in 1948 under substantial influence of the Soviet Union, which invested Kim Il Sung as the leader of the new republic. Kim, who was only 33 years old and weak compared to his domestic political rivals at the time, was able to purge all adversaries and establish a cult of personality that is arguably unsurpassed in modern times. According to the 1998 DPRK Socialist Constitution, Kim Il Sung is the "eternal President of the Republic," and the "founder of the immortal *juche* (chuch'e) idea." *Juche*, which literally means "self-reliance," was introduced in 1955 and became the state ideology in the DPRK. Kim Il Sung's unrivaled authority and longevity enabled him to transfer power to his son Kim Jong Il upon his death in July 1994.^[2]

Although the dynastic transfer of power was the first for a communist country, it is considered normal in a traditional neo-Confucian society. And despite DPRK claims that the KWP is a revolutionary mechanism for modernization, North Korea is very traditional in many respects, and the state arguably is more similar to a Chosŏn Dynasty (1392-1910) monarchy than a revolutionary socialist state. Despite widespread expectations that the KWP and Kim family dynasty would collapse in the wake of socialism's demise in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Kim Jong Il appears to enjoy firm political control even though the DPRK has lost its Soviet benefactor and suffered a massive famine and severe economic decline in the 1990s.

International political change and domestic economic problems have forced Pyongyang to reassess its foreign policy and its policy towards the United States. North Korea is inherently insecure because of Korean division. Both Koreas claim to be the sole legitimate governments for the entire Korean peninsula and Korean people. This insecurity is exacerbated by the experience of the Korean War, Washington's intervention in the war, the enduring U.S.-Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) alliance, and the collapse of the bipolar world system. Pyongyang's foremost concern is resolving Korean division in its favor, but as explained below, DPRK policy towards the United States is an integral part of the country's national strategy.

North Korea's Foreign Policy Institutions

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According to Article 17 of the 1998 Socialist Constitution, “independence, peace, and solidarity are the basic ideals of the foreign policy and the principles of external activities of the DPRK.” Furthermore, “the state shall establish diplomatic as well as political, economic and cultural relations with all friendly countries, on principles of complete equality, independence, mutual respect, noninterference in each other's affairs, and mutual benefit.” However, the Korean Workers' Party Bylaws are biased in prescribing how foreign policy should be conducted, calling for Third World solidarity and a united class struggle against international imperialism.[3] The party's foreign policy prescriptions were easier to implement during the Cold War, but “anti-imperialist” and anti-U.S. sentiments remain strong.

Nominally, the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) “exercises legislative authority and is the highest organ of state power in the DPRK.”[4] However, the 687-member legislature normally meets once a year for a few days in the spring to approve budgets and other governmental affairs that have been decided previously. The SPA Presidium and its approximate 15 members hold all SPA powers when the SPA is not in session, and these senior leaders hold de facto legislative power. According to the constitution, the SPA (and therefore, the SPA Presidium) has the authority to appoint and remove cabinet ministers—including the Foreign Minister—and other senior state officials. Senior government officials also hold high-level positions in the KWP, which reinforces the centralization of power to implement KWP policy objectives efficiently.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs ostensibly is responsible for foreign policy, but the military and other economic ministries contribute to the policymaking process in the realms of international security and international economic relations. The ministry's American Department is responsible for policy towards the United States. However, the KWP exerts control over DPRK foreign policy through the Central Committee's Secretariat and Politburo. Kim Jong Il is the General-Secretary of the KWP and the sole member of the Politburo Standing Committee, which is authorized to act on behalf of the Politburo when it is not in session. The KWP also has an International Department and other party organizations tasked with specific international activities to implement North Korean foreign policy.[5] In sum, North Korea's foreign policy and policy towards the United States is firmly under the control of Kim Jong Il; Kim certainly has a veto over any policy initiatives towards the United States.

Economic Problems and the Rising Influence of the North Korean Military

In the 1980s, the North Korean economy began to experience difficulties, which caused Pyongyang to reassess its international economic orientation.[6] In September 1984, the SPA Presidium passed the *Joint Venture Law*, the first in a series of legal and regulatory changes aimed at attracting foreign investment and transfers of foreign technology. These measures have been disappointing and have had virtually no effect on economic relations with the United States because of U.S. laws and regulations restricting economic transactions with the DPRK. Nevertheless, in the 1980s, DPRK policymakers began to realize the shortcomings of economic autarky and began to search for ways to obtain the benefits of an outward economic orientation while maintaining strict social and political control domestically—a difficult policy dilemma for Pyongyang.

North Korea's economic problems deteriorated further when the Soviet Union collapsed and Moscow discontinued subsidies to Pyongyang. North Korea suffered a huge terms of trade shock, which was exacerbated by devastating floods and a famine in the mid-1990s. North Korean policymakers were inept in adjusting to the economic shocks and the country continued most of its suboptimal agricultural and economic policies. The economic implosion of the 1990s undermined the state's capacity to provide public goods, and the state's food distribution system collapsed in much of the country. The KWP's ineptitude in dealing with the economic problems and the failure to resolve the nation's food shortages led Kim Jong Il to rely more and more on the Korean People's Army (KPA) to manage state affairs.[7]

In September 1998, the constitution was revised to usher in the Kim Jong Il era. The “Socialist Constitution” reflected the greater role of the military in state affairs by elevating the role of the National Defense Commission (NDC),^[8] which has been chaired by Kim Jong Il since 1993. Kim has been using his positions as NDC chairman and KWP General-Secretary^[9] to exert his control over North Korea’s militarized society and to address the challenges to social and political stability. Many analysts were puzzled that Kim Jong Il did not assume his father’s position of president following Kim Il Sung’s death in July 1994, but Kim Jong Il skillfully appointed his loyalists into important positions prior to assuming power officially in September 1998. While many analysts view the Kim dynasty as rigid, incapable of change and therefore doomed, Kim Jong Il and his close associates have implemented two new state ideologies to coincide with the institutional changes of 1998.

The term *son’gun chŏngch’i* (military first politics) first appeared in December 1997, but North Korea attributes 1995 as the beginning of “military first politics,” which the North Korean media now commonly calls “songun” or “songun politics” in its English publications.^[10] *Son’gun chŏngch’i* is invoked to reassure North Koreans that Kim is dedicated to providing national security against external threats, and to reassure the military—a major component of Kim Jong Il’s coalition—that Kim and the KWP will take care of the military and give it a first cut at scarce economic resources. *Son’gun chŏngch’i* also enables Kim to reassure hard-line skeptics that security will not be compromised as the country adopts economic reforms.

The second ideology—*kangsŏngdaeguk*—or establishing a “strong and prosperous country,” more broadly captures the DPRK’s national strategy under Kim Jong Il. The term *kangsŏngdaeguk* first appeared in the North Korean media in August 1998 in reference to Kim Jong Il having provided “on-the-spot guidance” in Chagang Province in February 1998.^[11] At first glance, a strong and prosperous country should be prominent or successful in everything, but North Korea focuses on four areas: ideology, politics, the military, and the economy.^[12] The North Korean leadership apparently believes the country is strong in terms of ideology and politics because the society has been indoctrinated for decades with the *juche* ideology of Kim Il Sung. Although the military balance has worsened for the DPRK, Pyongyang nevertheless is probably confident the military is strong given the implementation of *son’gun chŏngch’i* and the expansion of the country’s “nuclear deterrent.”^[13]

In the economic realm, the North Korean leadership acknowledges weakness, and Kim Jong Il has promoted himself as a tech-savvy modernizer dedicated to leading the country out of backwardness. The country introduced a package of economic reforms on July 1, 2002 that were targeted more at the microeconomic level than previous adjustments in economic policy. While the debate continues over the success or failure of these reforms, the regime has stressed that foreign capital and technology, as well as access to foreign markets, are necessary to achieve economic recovery and sustained growth. This realization has led Pyongyang to reassess its relations with the outside world, including its relations with Washington.

North Korea’s Policy towards the United States

North Korea’s foreign policy towards the United States has been shaped by the bitter experience of the Korean War and the DPRK’s position in the bipolar Cold War. The DPRK detested the United States for having thwarted Kim Il Sung’s effort to unite Korea by military force, and for the devastation unleashed by U.S. Air Force bombing campaigns during the war.^[14] North Korea has utilized the war experience to indoctrinate the population with anti-Americanism and to justify the state’s frequent warnings that a U.S. attack or invasion is imminent.^[15]

During the Cold War, the DPRK was vehemently opposed to the United States, which was depicted as the driving force behind imperialism and exploitive international capitalism. This view was compounded by the Korean War experience and the deep resentment over Washington’s

intervention, which Pyongyang has considered as an obstruction of Korean unification. There was little contact between the two countries during the Cold War, except for periodic clashes between the two militaries in areas surrounding the DPRK.^[16] North Korea's main foreign policy objective towards the United States during this period was to split the U.S.-ROK alliance and to effect the withdrawal of U.S. military forces in South Korea.^[17] To deter the United States from intervening in Korea again, the DPRK established formal alliances with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China when North Korea signed "treaties of friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance" with the two countries in July 1961.

Many American analysts and policymakers perceived North Korean relations with China and the USSR to be close during the Cold War, but the relationships actually were quite volatile, which caused Pyongyang to question the commitments of its alliance partners. Pyongyang's doubts about the credibility of its security alliances led the regime under Kim Il Sung to seek an independent arms production capability as well as weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and ballistic missiles. The collapse of the Soviet Union and China's normalization of relations with South Korea led Pyongyang to accelerate its nuclear weapons development program in the early 1990s and to reassess its security relationship with the outside world, particularly with Washington and Tokyo.

For North Korea, the United States plays a critical role in Pyongyang's efforts to achieve its national objectives. U.S. cooperation is necessary to achieve both security and economic goals, but Washington's indifference or refusal to cooperate with Pyongyang has left North Koreans frustrated and aggrieved. In the security realm, the DPRK since the early 1990s has sought negative security assurance from the United States. The DPRK's request has been reflected in a number of written documents,^[18] but Pyongyang cites the 2002 Nuclear Posture Review, economic sanctions, military exercises, President George W. Bush's "axis of evil" reference in his 2002 State of the Union Address, in addition to other activities and statements as evidence that the United States has a "hostile policy aimed at strangling the DPRK."

Given North Korea's weakness and threat perceptions, Pyongyang feels it has no choice but to strengthen its military capabilities to deter the United States. The dilemma for the DPRK is that its security policy towards the United States alienates Washington and decreases the likelihood of mutual cooperation in the economic realm, which Pyongyang desperately is seeking to achieve its economic objectives. The DPRK can never be secure with a hostile United States, but Pyongyang feels it has very little or no control over Washington's posture.

The contradiction in the DPRK's policy towards the United States is that its security and economic policies are irreconcilable. Pyongyang realizes that U.S. cooperation is necessary for the successful implementation of economic reforms based on an outward economic orientation. However, DPRK leaders seem to believe that Washington is intrinsically hostile, and that Pyongyang's security policy has no bearing on Washington's "hostile policy."

Pyongyang expected the 1994 Agreed Framework to change the overall nature of the U.S.-DPRK bilateral relationship, but Washington viewed the agreement in much narrower terms—as a mechanism to end North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Dissatisfaction with the agreement's implementation reinforced those in Pyongyang who were skeptical of U.S. credibility, which probably led to the DPRK hedging with a clandestine uranium enrichment program. The disclosure of the uranium enrichment program in 2002, and the DPRK's acknowledgment and subsequent denial of such a program, have seriously damaged any credibility Pyongyang had in Washington, making a negotiated diplomatic settlement to the North Korean nuclear issue extremely difficult.

In sum, for as long as Kim Jong Il remains in power, North Korea likely will pursue a national strategy based upon the concepts of *sŏn'gun chŏngch'i* and *kangsŏngdaeguk*. To achieve state objectives under these ideologies, Pyongyang will have to seek conflicting and contradictory

goals in its relationship with the United States. In the security realm, the DPRK will seek the capability to deter the United States, the termination of the U.S.-ROK alliance, and the withdrawal of U.S. military forces in South Korea. Pyongyang will also continue to seek negative security assurances in various forms, including a Korean War peace treaty, to serve its national objectives.

The paradox in North Korean policy towards the United States lies in the economic realm. In contrast to Pyongyang's ceaseless and shrill rhetoric against Washington regarding security matters, the DPRK would like to improve bilateral relations in order to obtain U.S. cooperation in the economic sphere. In particular, Pyongyang wants to be removed from the State Department's list of states that sponsor international terrorism, and have all U.S. sanctions removed so that the DPRK can join international financial institutions in order to gain access to foreign capital and overseas markets. For as long as U.S. sanctions remain in place, Pyongyang will blame them for the nation's economic problems; perversely, the sanctions serve the interests of the political elite since they provide a scapegoat for the economy's poor performance. The DPRK has been trying to achieve these conflicting goals in its policy towards the U.S. for over a decade without success, and is unlikely to achieve success in the near future.

About the Author

Daniel A. Pinkston is the director of the East Asia Nonproliferation Program and a Korea specialist at the Center for Nonproliferation Studies in Monterey, California. He has a doctorate in international affairs from the University of California, San Diego, and a master's degree in Korean studies from Yonsei University in Seoul. Dr. Pinkston recently directed the research and production of the North Korea Country Profile for the Nuclear Threat Initiative. This profile is the most comprehensive open-source overview and assessment of North Korea's programs to develop weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles. He has written on Korean political economy and security issues, and also served as a Korean linguist in the U.S. Air Force.

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References

1. According to Article 11, Chapter One of the 1998 DPRK Socialist Constitution, "The DPRK shall conduct all activities under the leadership of the Workers' Party of Korea."
2. Although Kim Jong Il did not assume power officially until the constitutional revision in September 1998, Kim already had been managing the details of state affairs under his father for years.
3. Chosŏnnodongdang kyuyak [Korean Workers' Party Bylaws] in ROK Ministry of Unification, *2004 Pukhan'gaeyo* [2004 North Korea Summary] (Seoul: Ministry of Unification, December 2003), 506.
4. Paragraph One, Chapter Six, 1998 DPRK Socialist Constitution.
5. ROK Ministry of Unification, *2004 Pukhan'gaeyo* [2004 North Korea Summary] (Seoul: Ministry of Unification, December 2003), 46-56, 138-141.

6. In the early 1970s, the DPRK borrowed extensively from Western banks to finance capital investment projects. However, Pyongyang maintained an import-substitution strategy and within a couple of years ran into problems servicing the debt, eventually defaulting on the loans. By the 1980s, inefficient resource allocation and economic stagnation became even more pronounced.

7. For example, see Kim Jong Il's speech "On the 50th Anniversary of Kim Il Sung University," delivered on December 7, 1996, available at <http://www.kimsoft.com/korea/kji-kisu.htm>.

8. Paragraph Two, Chapter Six, 1998 DPRK Socialist Constitution.

9. Kim became KWP General-Secretary on October 8, 1997. ROK Ministry of Unification, *2004 Pukhan'gaeyo* [2004 North Korea Summary] (Seoul: Ministry of Unification, December 2003), 91.

10. ROK Ministry of Unification, *2004 Pukhan'gaeyo* [2004 North Korea Summary] (Seoul: Ministry of Unification, December 2003), 35-38; "Rodong Sinmun on Songun Politics," Korean Central News Agency, June 8, 2006, <http://www.kcna.co.jp>.

11. ROK Ministry of Unification, *2004 Pukhan'gaeyo* [2004 North Korea Summary] (Seoul: Ministry of Unification, December 2003), 34-35.

12. Kang Söng-jong, *Pukhan'üi kangsöngdaeguk könsöljölyak* [Study on the North Korean Strategy for Building a Strong and Prosperous Country] (Seoul: Han'ulak'ademi, 2004), 100-107. The ROK Ministry of Unification combines "ideology and politics" into the single dimension of ideology. See ROK Ministry of Unification, *2004 Pukhan'gaeyo* [2004 North Korea Summary] (Seoul: Ministry of Unification, December 2003), 34-35.

13. On February 10, 2005, the DPRK Foreign Ministry announced that the country possesses nuclear weapons, and has subsequently declared the intent to "increase its nuclear deterrent." See "DPRK FM on Its Stand to Suspend Its Participation in Six-party Talks for Indefinite Period," Korean Central News Agency, February 10, 2005, <http://www.kcna.co.jp>; "North Korea Vows 'Annihilating Strike' if Attacked," Reuters, July 3, 2006.

14. The effectiveness of U.S. bombing forced North Korea to move military production facilities underground in the area of Kanggye near the Chinese border. "Kanggye chöngsin" or the "Kanggye spirit" is still invoked to encourage the establishment of underground facilities. For a brief overview of North Korea's tunnels and underground facilities, see Barbara Demick, "N. Korea's Ace in the Hole," *The Los Angeles Times*, November 14, 2003, A1.

15. For example, see "U.S.-led Joint Military Exercises Flailed," Korean Central News Agency, June 26, 2006, <http://www.kcna.co.jp>; "Yankees Urged to Go Home," Korean Central News Agency, June 26, 2006, <http://www.kcna.co.jp>; "DPRK's Stand on Projected RIMPAC-2006 Clarified," Korean Central News Agency, June 23, 2006, <http://www.kcna.co.jp>.

16. The DPRK was particularly provocative during the 1960s in its efforts to ignite a popular uprising or guerrilla war in South Korea. Pyongyang also responded aggressively to any incursions near its territory. For example, on January 18, 1968, North Korea sent 31 commandos across the military demarcation line in a secret mission to assassinate South Korean President Park Chung Hee. On January 23, 1968, the North Korean Navy captured the *USS Pueblo* in waters off the North Korean east coast near Wönsan. And on April 15, 1969 the North Korean Air Force shot down a U.S. Navy EC-121 reconnaissance plane in international air space off the east coast of North Korea. For details on how Kim Il Sung exploited the *USS Pueblo* captives for domestic political gain, see Mitchell Lerner, *The Pueblo Incident: A Spy Ship and the Failure of American Foreign Policy* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002).

17. The United States and the Republic of Korea signed U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty in October 1953.

18. The United States has provided negative security assurances in the “U.S.-DPRK Joint Statement” of June 11, 1993, the October 1994 Agreed Framework, and the “Statement of Principles” signed in Beijing by the delegates to the Six-party Talks on September 19, 2005. Furthermore, the United States pledged that it has no hostile intentions towards the DPRK in the U.S.-DPRK Joint Communiqué of October 2000. Nevertheless, DPRK leaders apparently view these assurances as lacking in credibility.

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